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Transcendent and Aspirational: Stephen Antonakos, 1926-2013

by Marshall N. Price

Stephen Antonakos, the Greek-born, New York City-raised artist famed for his pioneering use of neon, died suddenly in New York on August 17. Antonakos liked to define his work in terms of “real things in real spaces”. His mediums were light, color and movement; his abstract, minimal forms were lines and geometry, sometimes whole and sometimes broken; and the genres in which his subtle yet striking visual language evolved were myriad, ranging from wall constructions, to otherwise conventional paintings that utilized neon, public architectural commissions, installations, and even famously a series of chapels. While completely rooted in the New York scene, loosely associated with minimal art from the 1960s, Antonakos enjoyed an international profile, exhibiting at Documenta in 1977 and representing Greece at the Venice Biennale in 1997 with his “Chapel of the Heavenly Ladder.” One of the high points of his career came in 2011 when, as part of the 11th Aeschyleia Festival, Antonakos positioned 34 site-specific installations around the 17,000 square meter area of the festival’s location, a former industrial complex. The subject of a career retrospective in 2007 organized by the J.F. Costopoulos Foundation, Athens, Antonakos has also been selected to mark the centenary, next year, of the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens.

In 2011 Antonakos received a lifetime achievement award at the National Academy whose Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, **Marshall N. Price**, offers the following personal tribute to the artist:



Stephen Antonakos, Neons for 7475 Wisconsin Avenue. Photograph by M.V. Jantzen, 2006.

I met Stephen Antonakos in 2004, not long after he had been elected National Academician. His beautiful neon panel, *Arimathea*, had been included in the Academy's Annual Exhibition that spring and was prominently installed on the second floor of the museum. I was struck by Stephen's quiet, soft-spoken, and gentle demeanor and I immediately became fond of him. There was also something familiar about him, as if we had met earlier, but I could not quite put my finger on it at the time. As I learned more about his work, I realized that indeed we had met, in a sense, many years before. While riding in my parents' car in Bethesda, Maryland, some two decades earlier, I was captivated by a collection of glowing red neons in broken circles and other incomplete geometric shapes on the façade of a building. Stephen completed numerous public works of neon around the world during his long career and that evening I had encountered his *Neons for 7475 Wisconsin Avenue*. It had a tremendous impact on me and is an image that remains with me to this day.

As I got to know Stephen, his immeasurable depth of character, his immense sensitivity, and his thoughtful and reflective approach to life revealed themselves to me incrementally over time. In 2008, I was asked to organize an exhibition of his work for the Savannah College of Art and Design and over the next several months we determined the themes and selected works for the exhibition. Working closely with Stephen was a revelation for me and I began to better understand his subtle yet moving visual language. The broken geometric shapes, the striated colorful drawings, and the radiant neon light that make up his vocabulary imbue his works with transcendent and aspirational qualities that few contemporary works of art possess. We spoke about these attributes many times over the years and as a result I began to think about sculpture and drawing in an entirely new way. Light was Stephen's primary medium and while his passing is a tremendous loss for the entire art community, we are fortunate that his own radiant light will continue to shine in the transformative works he leaves behind.

<http://www.artcritical.com/2013/09/06/stephen-antonakos-1926-2013/#sthash.pF5dgehl.dpuf>